FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
April 15, 2001, Easter Sunday

Surprised by God
John M. Buchanan

We are fearful people. We are afraid of conflict, war, an uncertain future, illness, and, most of all, death. This fear takes away our freedom.... When we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves with a love that was there before we were born and will be there after we die, then oppression, persecution, even death will be unable to take our freedom. Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge – a knowledge more of the heart than the mind – that we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love... then all forms of evil, illness, even death lose their final power over us.

Henri J. M. Nouwen
Our Greatest Gift

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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SURPRISED BY GOD
Easter Sunday, April 15, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

1 Corinthians 15:19-26
John 20:1-18

"She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus."
John 20:14 (NRSV)

Dear God, we are in church this morning to hear a story that never fails to surprise us. We don't expect miracles—nor did they. We are realistic about our prospects—and so were they. We know that death is final—so did they. And as they were startled by the unexpected, so we ask you to startle us. Startle us out of our lethargy. Wake us up to the reality and power of love in the world and in our lives. Surprise us again, dear God, with the news that death has no power over us, that Jesus Christ is risen. Amen.

In the hills just outside Prague, there is a concentration camp built and operated by the Nazis from 1942 till the end of the war. Terezin is its name, and it is unusual because it was built for the express purpose of covering up what the Nazis were actually doing to Jews and Gypsies, priests and preachers, handicapped people, marginalized people. Terezin was a "model ghetto" –even billed as Hitler's gift to the Jews; some Jews went there voluntarily because they thought they would be safe. The Red Cross was invited to inspect the camp and was fooled. You can still see the spacious bathrooms, showers, sinks with mirrors—built for the Red Cross inspection and used just once.

Jews and others were sent to Terezin before being shipped to extermination centers. Every one of its inhabitants was condemned, in advance, to die.

Another unusual dimension of Terezin is the number of children who passed through its gates: 15,000 in three years. Only 100 survived. They did what children do while they were there: laughed and played, argued and fought, skipped and ran, made up games and drew pictures—sometimes on the walls of their crowded barracks, sometimes in notebooks or on scraps of paper.

The pictures, which the Allied forces discovered when they liberated the camp, depict life inside from a child's perspective and therefore are precious historical artifacts. But they are also—because they are pictures of flowers and birds and butterflies, lots of butterflies—those pictures are a witness to what has brought us here today, an event that always exceeds our ability either to describe it or understand it but which, nevertheless, we would not miss for anything in the world: God's transformation of death into life, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The preacher gets up early on Easter Sunday morning, earlier even than on most Sundays, long before dawn. I always think of that—that company of us, all over the world, literally thousands of us, up early in the morning for the biggest day of the year, some of us with responsibilities unique to this day: community or ecumenical sunrise services; in our case, a sunrise service on Oak Street Beach, which always attracts the most wonderfully diverse congregation: people dressed up for church, trudging through the sand in high heels and wing tips, strollers with babies bundled up, joggers, walkers in sweat suits, dogs (several Fourth Presbyterian dogs have a perfect Easter morning attendance record), friends, and complete strangers having an early morning stroll on the lakefront who see the small crowd and hear the hymns and can't resist. Later in the morning, we will face the largest congregations of the year—once, twice, three times our people gather, most of them visiting parents and children and neighbors and strangers who have been persuaded and pressured, even coerced into coming for "the big one." We are gullible, we ministers are, and we are people of high and relentless hope. We all think you come here to hear us talk and we all think that we will be so eloquent and compelling that you will all be back next Sunday.

We also share something else. We've been living with our own limitations and inadequacies this week. We have spent the preceding seven days scrambling, searching, going through files, reading old, standard texts and anything new we can get our hands on in order to find a new way to say what we've been trying to say for many years, trying, to put it plainly, to find the right words to describe something that is the most astonishing good news, the best news in the world, in fact; news that is simply bigger, better, and more glorious than any of the ways we have tried to tell it And so we are, all of us, grateful for all the assists we can have—trumpets and singers, great organ, beautiful flowers, dear children in wonderful Easter bonnets. It's the ecclesiastical equivalent of Super Bowl Sunday, a subway series in Chicago, the Cubs with five authentic starting pitchers and a four-game streak in April, or a return from death of the Chicago Bulls. And we're supposed to talk about it for twenty minutes or so. Each one of us knows that we aren't up to this, but each of us will experience in the course of the morning the power of this day, and it will be felt and celebrated and cherished in spite of us.

This day is about the reality and power of death and the greater reality and power of a love that conquers death.

"I shall not die, but I shall live," the psalmist wrote.

And St. Paul: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Fleming Rutledge, distinguished Episcopal priest, preacher, and author and to whom I looked for something new this year, says she "looks forward to this day more keenly each year as I get older, because . . . there isn't anything we can do about death. It is so damned inexorable, and I do mean damned. . . . We feel its presence as a hostile, invading power" (*Help My Unbelief,* pp. 196-199).

That is certainly how it felt to a small group of discouraged, depressed, frightened friends of Jesus, who huddled together behind a locked door somewhere in Jerusalem in the days following his execution by crucifixion on a Friday afternoon. On the first day of a new week, as life was returning to normal, they began, carefully and tentatively, to emerge from their hiding place. They would have to find their way back to Galilee, hopefully without attracting any attention. They were, to put it mildly, crushed. They had given themselves for three years to an idea that was just shown to be powerless, empty. They had allowed themselves to be convinced that love is better than hate, forgiveness better than revenge, that giving is better than getting, that life is more powerful than death, and it all had crumbled—as he was arrested, tried, and summarily executed. Best now to forget about it, go home, and, as we would say, get on with the rest of their lives.

One of those friends and followers, Mary Magdalene, was up early that morning and decided to go to the garden where Jesus had been buried on Friday afternoon. We know this story by heart. She discovers that the stone has been removed, so she runs back to the room to report what she has seen. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb"—the only logical conclusion. Peter and John run and have a look, observe an empty tomb and go home.

No one is thinking about resurrection. They aren't ignorant, gullible illiterates. They are realists. They know the ultimate power of death. So Mary returns to the garden, to be alone, to weep—for her dead friend and now for this final indignity, the final insult, the final loss: they've taken his body. In the midst of her grief, a man appears, the gardener, she assumes. He asks why she is weeping. She still doesn't recognize him. "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me." And the man says her name—"Mary"—and in that intimate moment, she knows—it is Jesus: he is alive; his death, which was horribly and ultimately real—which she had watched—has been overcome.

The story, with its simple integrity, is absolutely clear that no one expected it. No one was anticipating or even hoping for a resurrection. They knew, as we do, that things like that don't happen in this world, that the world is more or less predictable: dead people stay dead, and death is where it ends for all of us.

Mary was startled, stunned, surprised by God. She acts like we might act. She kept her wits about her, thought for a moment and concluded not that he had risen from the grave but that someone had stolen the body. And then, the personal encounter—her name spoken and her closed world is broken open.

I'm comforted by the fact that Mary and the other friends of Jesus did not leap to the conclusion that he had risen from death, that they had to be dragged, literally, to that conclusion. I've always been comforted by the integrity of the texts about this matter, that it is only when it gets personal, when Mary hears her own name, that Mary begins to entertain the notion of a resurrection. I'm encouraged by the fact that she was as surprised by God as you or I would be under the circumstances.

A very distinguished preacher of the last generation, Edmund Steimle, was commenting on the text "God's mercies are new every morning" and said, "At my age, this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in life when I don't want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast as normal. At my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning." (See Thomas Long in *Journal for Preachers,* Easter 2001, "Growing Old and Wise on Easter.")

When your eyes and ears are open, however, and your heart and soul, no matter how old you are, the world is full of surprises, unexpected beauty, unanticipated love: the heartbreaking beauty of an anthem or a symphony; the sun new every morning over Lake Michigan; a daffodil bravely announcing the return of spring; a child—out of nowhere—squeezing your hand, leaping into your arms; and yes, sometimes even life in the midst of death, butterflies on the walls in the concentration camp.

I love the way the late Henri Nouwen put it, not long before his own death:

"We are afraid of a lot of things," he wrote—most of all, we are afraid of death. "This fear takes away our freedom. But when we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born, and will be there after we die, then nothing will be able to take away our freedom" (*Our Greatest Gift,* pp.1-7).

And Douglas John Hall: "Resurrection is the ultimate declaration of God's grace. It is not natural. It is not automatic. It is wholly dependent upon the faithfulness, forbearance and love of God. And just for that reason I am able to sleep at night." (See Thomas Long, "Growing Old and Wise on Easter.")

And Hans Kung: "The Easter message is that Jesus did not die into nothingness . . . but into God. And so our last road does not lead to nothingness, but the most primal ground, from mortal darkness to God's eternal light" (*On Being a Christian,* p. 358).

And Chicago's Joseph Sittler: "Nothing in the world can hurt us anymore. . . . The great surpassing fact is that the world which killed him is also a world in which God raised him from death" (*Evocations of Grace,* p. 34).

On and on, the mounting testimony accumulates: the frightened woman whose name he said; the disciples transformed—from their fear into courage and stamina, and strength and heroism that changed a world; the Hallelujah choruses and crowds on the beach at sunrise; the sanctuaries crowded with believers and doubters, skeptics and seekers; and at some point, on Easter, you and I have to abandon the quest for overwhelming evidence and compelling testimony and open ourselves to the message of this day as it comes to us personally. He said her name.

It is about you and me, finally. Of course we're afraid. Who isn't? "The Good News," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "is that when the bottom has fallen out from under you, when you have crashed through all your safety nets . . . the good news is that you cannot fall farther than God can catch you" (*Bread of Angels,* p. 133).

The world is a different place because of this day: the world is a theater of God's grace and love and reconciliation; a world full of God's surprises; a world—because God is stronger than death—where it makes sense to keep working for peace and justice regardless of the long odds; a world where it makes sense to hold on and never abandon hope; a world no longer in the grip of the power of evil and death, but a world suddenly, surprisingly, beautifully new.

It is about us, finally, you and me and our lives and how we live them—for however long we are given to live.

I saw a remarkable movie, recently made for television. *Wit* is the title, from a play by Margaret Edson. It is about a woman, Vivian Bearing, played brilliantly by Emma Thompson. Vivian Bearing is an English professor, a demanding scholar whose specialty is John Donne, the sixteenth-century poet and clergyman. Vivian is dying of cancer and she is virtually alone, dealing alone with doctors and nurses and hospitals and researchers who convince her to submit to a particularly powerful and therefore painful experimental regimen of chemotherapy. She loses her hair, loses weight, is dreadfully sick, and the chemotherapy doesn't work. Her tumor shrinks but the cancer spreads. She is going to die. Throughout the story, John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," her academic specialization, keeps coming up in memory, in conversation.

Donne wrote:

> **Death be not proud, though some have called thee**
> **Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so . . .**
> **Why swell'st thou then?**
> **One short sleep past, we wake eternally,**
> **And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.**

Vivian's doctoral advisor and professor and mentor and model, a very distinguished academic, taught her that sonnet with its symmetry, its brave assertion, its punctuation:

> **And death shall be no more; (semi-colon)**
> **Death, (coma) <u>thou</u> shalt die.**

Vivian is alone mostly. As she becomes weaker and sicker, John Donne's words keep emerging in her subconscious. But then, as death nears, someone finally speaks her name. Her professor and mentor, now an elderly woman, seeks her, finds her, alone in her hospital bed and says, "Vivian—is that you? Oh Vivian" and then does the most remarkable thing—removes her shoes and gets in bed and holds Vivian, cradling her head

to her breast. She opens a package, this demanding, dignified, sophisticated scholar of sixteenth-century English literature, and reads Vivian the book she has brought. It's not John Donne; it's a simple child's book about love that will not let us go. It is about what John Donne wrote about. It is about love more powerful than death.

> **Once there was a little bunny, who wanted to run away.**
>
> **So he said to his mother, "I am running away."**
>
> **"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you, for you are my little bunny."**
>
> **"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."**
> **"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."**
>
> **"I will be come a rock,"**
>
> **"and I will become a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are."**
>
> **"I will become a bird and fly away from you."**
>
> **"If you become a bird and fly away from me," said his mother, "I will be a tree that you come home to." (*The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown)**

"And death shall be no more," John Donne wrote. "Death, thou shalt die."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

It is a new world you and I live in now.

Death no longer rules.

Jesus Christ is risen today.

Amen.